

Set the ball rolling...

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Over the years people engaged with elementary education have been wrestling with tools to make a realistic assessment of both provisions (teachers, schools, facilities) and outcomes (learning). Given the size and enormous diversity of India this has remained a huge challenge. At periodic intervals sample surveys like NSS and NFHS have generated information on children attending school and mean years of schooling, which have been used by different constituencies to illustrate the progress or lack of it in the education sector. Equally national research studies like PROBE (1999) or state specific studies like Pratiche Education report (2002) have drawn the attention of the government to school participation, teacher availability, attendance and learning¹. Similarly donor sponsored studies – for example on teacher absence – have also turned the spotlight on some important issues. Commissioned studies done under the aegis of District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and, now Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) have also been valuable additions to our knowledge base.

While some of these studies have drawn flack from official quarters they have nevertheless forced attention on both the dismal situation in large parts of the country and the success stories notably the near universal school participation in Himachal Pradesh. The government has also made commendable efforts to fine-tune official DISE statistics and the ten-yearly educational survey (NCERT) to capture progress towards educational objectives. At the same time the government has also admitted the limitations of data generated by the system. Most recently Government of India commissioned a sample survey to estimate the number of out-of-school children². This is indeed a welcome step because comparing system generated statistics with information generated through sample survey would indeed give us valuable insights into the situation on the ground.

Notwithstanding the range and wealth of information generated on different aspects of elementary education there has been a growing realisation that periodic independent assessment of where we are with respect to both provision as well as outcomes is necessary. It is in this context that ASER 2005 initiated by Pratham is valuable. The survey is commendable not only because it has been done in 485 districts across the country but because it involved a wide range of people – from local voluntary organisations to ordinary citizens who volunteered to participate in the survey. Among the little known facts of ASER is that 373 districts were paid for by individual donors or institutions who contributed Rs 500 to Rs 10,000 each to cover the cost of the survey. Voluntary and social action groups joined in as partners with close to 776 small and big groups joining the effort in different ways.

The survey consisted of three parts – household level interviews, testing of children (using tests to assess ability to read and to do simple arithmetic at the class 2 level) and status of government schools. This may seem very simplistic to many people in the academia. Equally educationists used to debating the fine points of learning and testing may express their outrage at such an endeavour. Yet discussions with people involved in the survey revealed that they felt that even such basic testing (of reading paragraph and story and subtraction and division in arithmetic) drew the attention of the parents and community leaders to whether children were learning.

The findings of ASER are quite interesting. While there have really not been any big surprises with respect to enrolment the most disturbing finding is that close to 1.4 crore children are still out of school! The situation in Bihar (13.5%), Rajasthan (10.4%), Jharkhand (9.8%) and even Andhra Pradesh (7.4%) is quite worrisome. Almost 8 years of DPEP and 3 years of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan – apart from state specific projects like Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Project (1987-1994), Bihar Education

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² (1) Pratiche (India) Trust: The Pratiche Education Report, New Delhi 2002 and PROBE Report. 1999. (2) Public Report on Basic Education in India. Delhi: Oxford University Press. (3) Jha, Jyotsna and Dhir Jhingran, Elementary Education for the Poorest and other Deprived Groups, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi 2002, (4) Vasavi, A. R. and K. Chamraj. 2000. Community-School Interlinks: Preliminary Report of a Socio-anthropological Study of Primary Education in Five Districts of Karnataka. Bangalore. National Institute of Advances Studies. (5) Ramchandran, Vimala (ed): Hierarchies of Access: Gender and Social Equity in Primary Education in India, Sage Publications, 2004.

³ Apparently the report has just been submitted by IMRB.

Project (1991 till it merged with DPEP in 1994), Rajasthan Shiksha Karmi Project (1987 to 2003) and Rajasthan Lok Jumbish (1992 to 2004) – seem to have had limited impact.

The good news is that the gender gap in the percentage of out of school children has come down. Till 2001 it was estimated that over 65% of out of school children were girls. Now it is 52% (6-10 age) and 55% (11-14 age). Another good news is that 77.2% teachers were found to be present in the school and that only 8.3% of primary schools and 7.5% of upper primary schools did not have teachers. In several states 100% of teachers appointed to the surveyed school were present on the day of visit. The flip side is also interesting – 37.2% of primary schools and 25% of upper primary schools (government schools) visited in Kerala did not have any teacher present on the day of visit!

ASER has confirmed that the percentage of boys to girls in private school is skewed in favour of the former. While the all-India proportion is 60:40 state-wise differences are significant. The ratio worsens as we move north of the Narmada towards Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and so on. Son preference is demonstrated in more ways than sex-selective abortions.

The alarming findings relate to reading and arithmetic. ASER did not test children for age or grade specific competency. It tested the ability of children to read (a simple paragraph or story pitched at grade 2 level). Close to 35% of children in the 7-14 age group could not read a simple paragraph (grade 1 level difficulty) and almost 60% of children could not read a simple story (grade 2 level difficulty). The huge surprise is that the situation in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Gujarat (where the schools function and where all provision related indicators are good) are far worse than Bihar, and Chhattisgarh (where indicators like teacher-pupil ratio, drop out rates and schooling facilities are abysmal). The percentage point difference between government and private schools is approximately 10. Which means that almost 30% of children in private schools cannot read grade one level paragraphs.

The situation with respect to mathematics is also quite alarming. Our IT hubs like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu need to seriously think about the way mathematics is taught in schools – government as well as private. Similarly, despite so many years of back-to-school programmes and bridge courses in Andhra Pradesh the percentage of out of school children is indeed worrying. This is particularly alarming in the light of girl child labour in cottonseed farms and in cotton plucking. Here is a state that traverses a pre-industrial agrarian situation with a highly modern information technology industry.

We need to interpret these findings with caution. It has to be noted that while a significant proportion children entering class 1 reach class 5 in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka the drop out rate in Bihar is high. Furthermore only around 51.8% of enrolled children attend school regularly. Therefore (unlike TN and Karnataka) the ones who have reached class 5 are not only a self-selected group but they are the ones who are highly motivated. These findings may just be revealing a small tip of the iceberg. There is an urgent need to study when and how good provisions (classrooms, teachers, textbooks, mid day meal and so on) translate into outcomes in learning and in ability of children to complete schooling.

The data generated by ASER needs far more rigorous analysis and that would be done in the coming months. The single most important contribution of ASER is that an independent group got together an interesting range of individuals and organisations to find out what is really happening to our children. Creating a space for independent (neither government sponsored or donor driven) assessment of India's progress towards universal elementary education is invaluable. This effort could perhaps encourage groups across the country to initiate similar audit of education, child development, health and indeed many other dimensions of development.